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ABSTRACT

Two issues which are addressed in children's cross-race relationships are assessment and intervention. Results from two different types of sociometric studies are reviewed: those using measures of cross-race "best-friendship" and those using measures of "acceptance." Comparisons suggest that using a criterion of best-friendship rather than acceptance provides an overly negative picture of children's racial attitudes. Data are presented from a recent longitudinal study of cross-race acceptance. The 38 black and 116 white children who participated had experienced desegregated education since kindergarten. They were tested when they were in third grade and again when they were in sixth grade. Children were asked to indicate on a five-point scale how much they liked to play with each of their classmates. Both black and white children showed some preference for their own race in third grade. By sixth grade own-race preference increased, especially among black children. The degree of racial bias was small, however, and the results provide a more positive picture of cross-race relationships then that obtained in previous research. Programs designed to improve children's cross-race relationships are reviewed and suggestions are made for further research on the social-cognitive bases of children's cross-race liking. (Author)

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The Role of Peer Perception in Classroom Interventions With Black and White Children

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The Role of Peer Perception in Classroom Interventions
With Black and White Children

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Introduction

There are a number of ways to examine black and white children's perceptions of their peers. Some of these methods include interviews, attitude questionnaires, and sociometric measures of friendship or popularity. Many researchers have focused on the amount of cross-race friendships among black and white children as an index of peer perceptions in desegregated classrooms. Optimistically, when desegregation began, it was hoped that simply placing black and white children together in the same classroom would result in increased friendships between the two groups. In fact, research has shown that this is not the case. Most studies have found that both black and white elementary school children report few cross-race friendships, and that children's preference for friends of their own race increase as they get older (e.g., Bartel, Bartel, & Grill, 1973; Gerard, Jackson, & Conolley, 1976; Shaw, 1973). These somewhat discouraging findings raise two important issues concerning the integration of white and minority-group students, which I would like to discuss today. The first is an assessment issue. I will describe an alternative to the "best-friendship" sociometric measure as a means of assessing children's perceptions of their black and white peers. I will present data from a study which measured

cross-race acceptance rather than best-friendship in desegregated classrooms. The second issue is intervention. I will discuss some promising interventions designed to improve cross-race relations among elementary school children, and I will make some suggestions for further research in this area.

Assessment: Friendship or Acceptance?

A number of researchers have used sociometric measures to study peer relationships. These sociometric studies can be divided into two groups. The larger group of studies has asked the question, "Do children choose peers of another race as best friends or most-preferred playmates?". These studies can be contrasted with the research I will present which asks the question, "Do children express acceptance or liking for other-race peers?".

Most sociometric studies have used a nomination type of measure in which children are asked to name their best friends or most-preferred playmates. A child's score is the number of nominations received from peers. For example, Bartel, Bartel, & Grill (1973) asked Kindergarten through fourth-grade children which of their peers they would most prefer to sit with, to be helped by, to be on a team with, etc. Both black and white children tended to select members of their own race. There was an increase in racial polarization over age and by fourth grade, black children were nominating almost only black children and white children were nominating almost only white children. Similar own-race preference was reported by Shaw (1973). Shaw asked fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade children who they most

preferred to be with. Approximately 80% of the children were white and 20% were black. Both whites and blacks overselected members of their own race. About 94% of the white children's selections were of whites, and about 67% of the black children's selections were of blacks.

This type of nomination measure provides a particularly stringent test of the effects of desegregation. If I were to ask each of you to name your three best friends, many of you might not include a person of another race on that list. Yet you would object if I concluded from that information that you disliked members of other races. Similarly, perhaps the nomination type of sociometric measure is giving an unrealistically negative picture of desegregated classrooms. Given the social climate in which desegregation often takes place, it is probably unrealistic to expect many cross-race best-friendships to develop. Perhaps a more realistic objective is an increase in cross-race acceptance and liking, rather than the more difficult to achieve objective of cross-race best-friendship. I would now like to report a portion of the results of a longitudinal study that I have been doing with Dr. Steven Asher at the University of Illinois. In this study, we are examining developmental changes in children's cross-race relations in desegregated classrooms, on a measure which indexes acceptance rather than best-friendship (Asher & Singleton, 1978; Singleton & Asher, 1977; Singleton & Asher, in press).

The Developmental Investigation

The Sample. The children who participated in our study

were from twelve elementary schools in a moderate-size mid-western city. The study was requested by school district personnel who were interested in the effects of desegregation in their district. There were 154 children in the sample who were tested when they were in third-grade in 1973 and again when they were in sixth-grade in 1976. Seventy-five percent of the children were white and 25% were black. Third-grade was chosen because these children were the first group in the district who had been in desegregated classrooms since kindergarten.

The Sociometric Measure. In the sociometric measure we used, children were asked to rate each of their classmates on a 5-point scale, first in terms of how much they liked to play with each classmate, and then in terms of how much they liked to work with each classmate. A rating of 1 indicated that the child did not like to play or work with a person at all. A rating of 5 indicated that the child liked to play or work with a person a lot. The actual questions we asked were, "How much do you like to play with this person at school?", and "How much do you like to work with this person at school?". Each child gave ratings to every child in the room. Children's scores were the average ratings they received from the white boys, the white girls, the black boys, and the black girls in the class.

Results. Since the results for the play and work ratings

were fairly similar, I'll present the results for the play ratings only. Analyses of variance indicated that children did show significant preference for members of their own race at both third- and sixth-grades. Although statistically significant, these differences were small, as can be seen in the Figure which I have distributed. Let's look at the results for the third-grade first. Black children in third-grade gave other black children an average rating of 3.47 (solid bar), while they gave white children an average rating of 3.38 (striped bar). Own-race preference by white children in third grade was a little bit stronger. White children gave other whites an average rating of 3.02 (solid bar), while they gave black children an average rating of 2.75 (striped bar).

The pattern of change over age in racial preference differed for black and white children. As you can see in the Figure, white children showed little change over age. In sixth grade, white children gave other whites an average rating of 2.84 (solid bar), and they gave black children an average rating of 2.61 (striped bar). Thus the amount of own-race preference they showed was similar at both grade levels. Black children, however, showed more preference for other blacks in sixth than in third grade. This resulted from black children both increasing their ratings of other black children and decreasing their ratings of white children. The average rating that black children gave other blacks in sixth grade was 3.80 (solid bar), while they gave whites an average rating of 3.08 (striped bar).

Even though children in our study rated members of their own race higher, they still gave rather high ratings, even in sixth grade, to their cross-race classmates. These results present a more positive picture of peer relations in desegregated classrooms than most previous research. The data do indicate, however, that the additional years of interracial contact between third and sixth grades, for these children, did not result in improved cross-race relations, even on a measure of acceptance rather than best-friendship. It should be noted that during this time no district-wide programs were initiated to help integrate white and minority-group students. Our data suggest that such interventions are needed.

Intervention: Changing Children's Perceptions of Their Peers

The problem of isolation of racial groups from each other is two-sided. It is a result of both white children excluding their minority classmates, and of minority- group children excluding their white classmates. Any intervention, if it is to be successful in bringing these two groups closer together, must promote behavior and attitude change in both the white and the minority-group children. A number of investigators have examined whether placing children in cooperative learning groups in the classroom improves children's cross-race relations. One such program, reported by Blaney, Stephan, Rosenfield, Aronson, & Sikes (1977) has had promising results with fifth-grade children. The idea behind the program was to place white and minority students in a small group situation where

each child had something to contribute, and where cooperation and helpfulness were necessary for the group to succeed. Children were divided into small learning groups of 4 to 7 members including both white and minority students. A social studies curriculum was developed for the program. Each of the lessons was divided into as many parts as there were group members. Each child was responsible for learning one part of the lesson and for teaching that part to the other group members. Since everyone had to eventually learn the entire lesson, only by cooperating and helping each other could the group reach it's goal. Did this kind of structured, cooperative interaction in interracial groups change children's perceptions of each other? One of the dependent measures was a sociometric rating-scale in which children were asked to indicate their liking for classmates on a 7-point scale. Overall, children reported an increase in liking for both the same-race and cross-race members of their learning groups. These results are encouraging, especially considering the brief periods of time children spent in the program. They met for only 45 minutes a day, 3 times a week, for 6 weeks. Similar increases in cross-race acceptance and more positive racial attitudes were reported by DeVries and Edwards (1974), and by Weigel, Weiser, and Cook (1975). Their programs were different variations of the small, cooperative interracial learning groups.

These intervention programs are based on the assumption that more positive, cooperative experiences with other-race peers will result in increased cross-race acceptance. The

studies do indicate that giving children of different races the opportunity to interact in small, structured groups where cooperation rather than competition is rewarded, can have positive effects on their cross-race relationships and racial attitudes. They tell us very little, however, about children's perceptions of the behavior of their other-race peers. The underlying assumption of these programs is that children will notice and respond positively to the cooperative behavior of their classmates. In fact, we know very little about children's perceptions of their peer's behavior. We do not know the extent to which children are willing to accept new behavioral information about others. And we do not know how this new behavioral information will influence children's evaluations of their peers. The issue here is whether children will be influenced almost exclusively by their own prejudices,or if they will be responsive to new behavioral information. These types of questions, specifically focusing on some of the social-cognitive bases for cross-race liking,seem to be important ones for future research. Through interviews and classroom observations over time, we can learn more about the ways in which children perceive and process new bheavioral information about their other-race classmates.

In summary, I have suggested that cross-race acceptance is a more realistic objective than best-friendship in desegregated classrooms. I have also discussed some features of classroom interventions which have been effective in changing children's perceptions of their peers. In future research we need to learn more about the ways in which

children perceive their same-race and cross-race classmates. This knowledge could than be used in the design of interventions aimed at integrating white and minority-group students.

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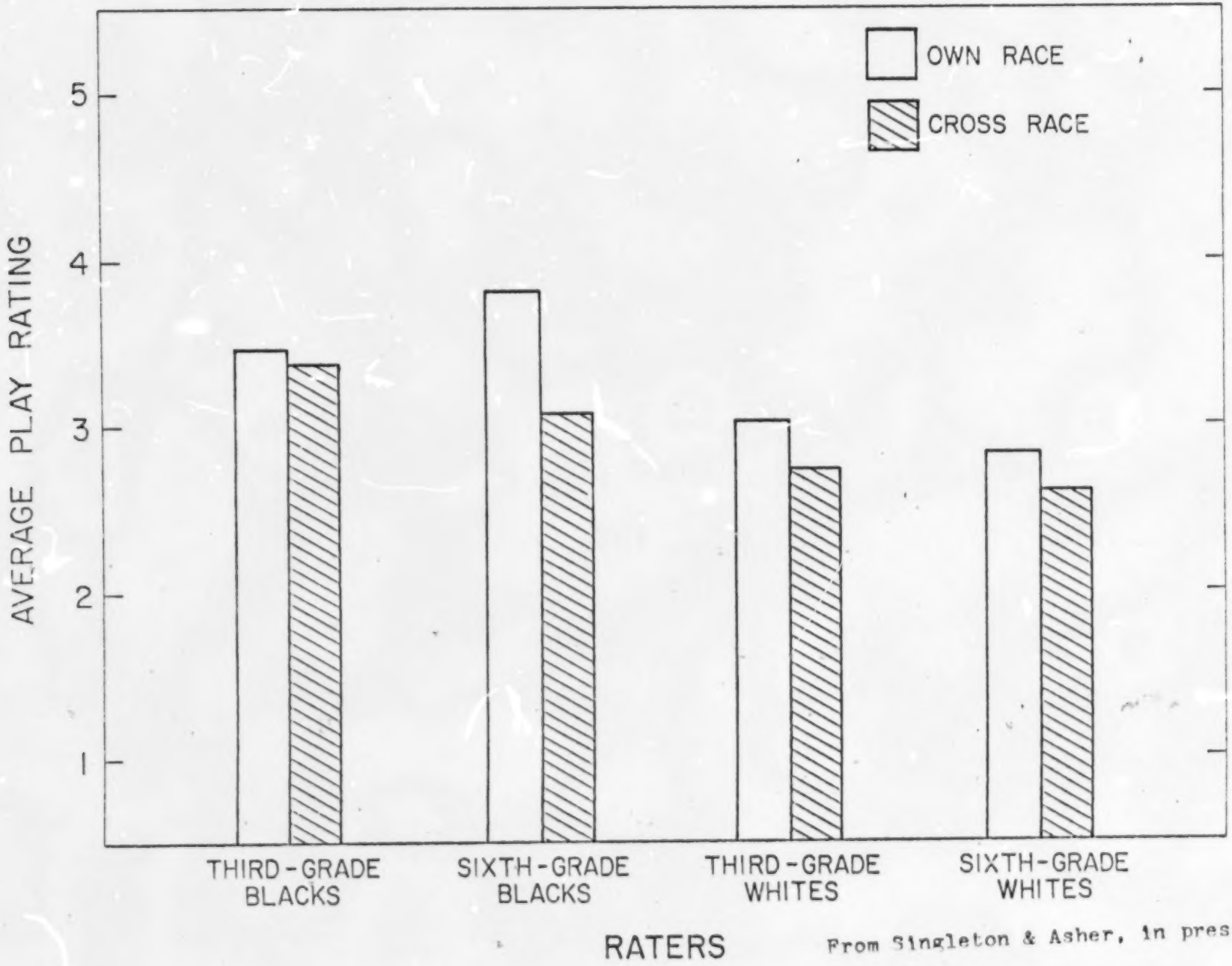

From Singleton & Asher, in press